



Home

Popular

RECENT

 r/IQOO_7_Series

TOPICS

 Internet Culture (Viral)

 Games


 Q&As

 Technology

 Pop Culture

 Movies & TV

RESOURCES

 About Reddit

 Advertise

 Help

 Blog


 Careers

 Press

 Communities

 Best of Reddit

 Topics

 Content Policy

 Privacy Policy

 User Agreement

Why Advaita makes more sense to me than Vishistadvaita philosophy (or why a vishishtadvaitin became advaitin)

I grew up in a Srivaishnava Vishistadvaita (Ramanuja/Vedanta Desikan) household until I graduated college. Much later in life, I was exposed to Advaita philosophy and I now identify as an Advaitin. Here are several reasons why Advaita makes more sense to me than Vishistadvaita. (This post does not delve into Dvaita since those views are quite far from my own, so I did not study Dvaita seriously.)

Background

The three major Vedantic Schools (Advaita/Vishishtadvaita/Dvaita) are all derived from the same Hindu texts (Shruti: Vedas, Smriti: Bhagavad Gita, : Nyaya: Brahma Sutra). Yet, they provide fundamentally different interpretations. Debates between the schools have gone on for centuries, with no reconciliation in sight. The champions of these three schools – Adi Shankaracharya (Advaitam), Sri Ramanuja (Vishishtadvaitam) and Sri Madhvacharya (Dvaitam) – are all intellectual giants in their own rights, and it is impossible (and quite arrogant) to declare that one school is right and the others wrong. Therefore it is left to the spiritual seeker to make his own judgement about what is right from himself or herself.

Bheda/Abheda/Ghataka Shruti

In the Upanishads, we can find three types of statements describing the relationship between Jivatma and Paramatma.

The first type is Bheda Shruti (Bheda means different). A classic example is the Mundaka Upanishad verse about two birds sitting in the tree.

Mundaka 3.1.1 Two birds, united always and known by the same name, closely cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit; the other looks on without eating.

Mundaka 3.1.2 Seated on the same tree, the jiva moans, bewildered by his impotence. But when he beholds the other, the Lord worshipped by all and His glory, he then becomes free from grief.

The bird feeding on the fruit is the Jivatma. The bird that is looking on is the Paramatma. This type of statement seems to imply that the Jivatma and Paramatma are different, separate entities. Dvaita philosophy is based on such verses.

The second type of statement is Abheda Shruti (Abheda means non-different). One easy example is "Aham Brahmasmi":

Brihadaranyaka 1.4.10 This (self) was indeed brahman in the beginning. It knew only I(?) as. 'I am Brahman.' Therefore It became all. ...

This statement suggests that the Jivatma and Paramatma are the same. These verses are favorites of Advaitins.

The third type is called Ghataka Shruti. Vishishtadvaitins say that this type of statement reconciles the seeming contradictions between Bheda and Abheda Shruti. One example is Brihadaranyaka Section 3.7 Antaryami (means Inner Controller) Brahmanam.

Brihadaranyaka 3.7.1 ...The Gandharva said to him and the students, "Kāpya, do you know that Internal Ruler who controls this and the next life and all beings from within?" Patañcala Kāpya said, "I do not know Him, sir." The Gandharva said to him and the students, "He who knows that Sūtra and that Internal Ruler as above indeed knows Brahman, knows the worlds, knows the gods, knows the Vedas, knows the beings, knows the self, and knows everything." He explained it all to them. I know it. If you, Yājñavalkya, do not know that Sūtra and that Internal Ruler, and still take away the cows that belong only to the knowers of Brahman, your head shall fall off.'...

This type of description implies that Brahman is present as the "Inner Controller" in each being. This is the Vishishtadvaitin view, where Isvara is the atma of the Jiva's atma (atma²). Vishishtadvaita means "qualified Advaita", where the Jivatma is a "quality or property or part" (loose translation, I don't want to get into the full definition here) of the Paramatma. This approach seems very reasonable, since it could explain both Bheda statements "Jivatma and Paramatma are different" and Abheda statements "Jivatma and Paramatma are the same".

Danger of isolated interpretations - necessity of Brahma Sutra

So you can see it is easy to get focused on individual shruti statements and be led astray. It is important to look at Vedic teachings as a whole before making any conclusions. Brahma Sutra analyzes the entire shruti corpus as a whole and identifies the correct interpretation logically. For this reason, Brahma Sutra must be regarded as the most important tool in the final analysis.

Brahma Sutra - Arambhanadhikaranam

At least for me, the most compelling reason lies in Brahma Sutra Arambhanadhikaranam - 2.1.14-20. Here is a link to the [Brahma Sutra lecture transcripts of Swami Paramarthananda](#) for reference, starting at page 47. Brahma Sutra in general *does not* delve into differences between Vedantic schools, but this adhikaranam is an exception. Shankara Bhāṣyam lists no fewer than 11 shruti contradictions in VA philosophy:

1. Nirvikara sruti virodhah - Brahman is changeless. VA argues that Brahman is like a tree/branches and we evolve from Brahman. In parinama vada both cause and effect are equally real.

2. Niravayavatva sruti virodhah - the world and jiva are taken as the organs or parts of Brahman, but Brahman is indivisible.
3. Nithyatva sruti virodhah - if Brahman is savayavam endowed with avayavam or limbs then Brahman will become anithyam because there is a law yad yad savayavam tad tad anithyam.
4. Sathyatva sruti virodhah - VA says karyam is real. Shruti is clear that only karanam is real and that karyam is only a namadeyam and it has only verbal existence.
5. dvaita nisheda sruti virodhah - Shruti *explicitly* negates duality, but does not negate non-duality.
6. sarva vijñana sruti nishedah - if Brahman and the world are equally real then by knowing one others cannot be known. Shruti *explicitly* says that knowing one thing, everything can be known.
7. aikya sruti virodhah - Tat Tvam Asi, Aham Brahmasmi are not explainable
8. jñana sadhanatva sruti virodhah - If the world is as real as Brahman, then jivah is also like that and sariram is real; punya papa is real and then samsara also will be real. The sathyam cannot be destroyed by jñanam. Shruti says the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme. Mere knowledge cannot destroy the real.
9. tatvara drastanta sruti virodhah - tat tvam asi is a factual statement and will liberate you the Upanishad says tat tvam asi is a fact. Abeda is a fact. Then beda must be taken as mithya.
10. Asangatva sruti virodhah - If the world is taken as part of Brahman and the world has got the same degree of reality all the guna doshas, which belongs to, the world also will become an integral part of Brahman and Brahman will become sangah. It is like if there is some problem in Kerala, we cannot say that there is no problem in India for kerala is part of India and any problem anywhere will be the problem of India the whole country.
11. Nirvishesha sruti virodhah - All the sruti statements and nirvishesha statement those sruti that declares as nishkalam and is without attributes all declare are free from attributes.

To be fair to VA, I have not read Sri Bhashyam (which is Sri Ramanuja's commentary on Brahma Sutra). Someone more learned than me may need to educate me on how Ramanuja handles this adhikaranam. I will try and investigate this later.

Ramanuja's rejection of Advaita - sapta-vida anupapatti

Ramanuja's main objections to Advaita is captured in his work - sapta-vida anupapatti - the seven great untenables. All seven have been refuted (at least to my own satisfaction) in John Grimes book, which I have attempted to [cryptically summarize here](#).

Fundamental analysis of three vedantic schools by Swami Paramarthananda

This is a summary table from Swami Parmarthananda's Guru Purnima talk published in 2016. This is a very fundamental, unbiased analysis, in my opinion.

Nature of	Advaita View	Vishishtadvaita View	Dvaita View
Individual Jiva	Infinite (same as Brahman)	Atomic (part of Brahman)	Atomic (separate from Brahman)
World	Relatively real (Mithya)	Real (part of Brahman)	Real (separate from Brahman)
Brahman	Nirguna (no attributes)	Saguna (only good attributes)	Saguna (only good attributes)
Samsara	Springs from misconception that I am dependent	Springs from misconception that I am independent	Springs from misconception that I am independent
Moksha	Knowledge that I am independent and infinite (travel from dependence to independence)	Eternal dependence and service to Ishvara in Vaikunta (travel from independence to dependence on Brahman)	Eternal dependence and service to Ishvara (travel from independence to dependence on Brahman)
Main Sadhana	Jnana Yoga	Bhakti Yoga	Bhakti Yoga

I prefer the Advaita view from this table.

My miscellaneous arguments

1. Vishishtadvaita does not recognize nirguna Brahman or arupa Brahman. It stops at Aneka arupa Eswara (the Universe). My take: Any form is a limitation. Any property like form or color is subject to change (affected by time). IMHO, arupa Brahman makes sense.
2. Vishishtadvaita believes the Universe is Real. Advaita says the Universe is mithya (dependent reality). My take: Advaita seems to treat permanence and reality as equivalent. I still have trouble internalizing this. Mithya should be treated as a "lower-order" reality.
3. Vishishtadvaita considers dream state (and waking state) as reality. Your karma is also exhausted in the dream state (i.e. if you suffer in your dream, you are exhausting karma). My take: This is as hard to accept as the Advaita view that the waking state is unreal.
4. Vishishtadvaita says you can get moksha only after death. Advaita has the concept of jeevan mukti (moksha here and now). My take: if moksha is eternal, then it has to be here and now, outside time. Advaita view is consistent with that. If moksha has a start date, it will have an end date also.

5. Vishishtadvaita says you can get moksha only through Saranagathi (surrender) to a Guru. My take: The idea that I need an agent to get to Brahman is unappealing to me. Further explanation: Guru is a recommendation – not a requirement. Guru's status is the same as Brahman. If you look at it this way, it sounds reasonable.
6. Vishishtadvaita says that you get moksha by going to Vaikunta (let's say heaven for simplicity). In Vaikunta, there is a hierarchy – God (Vishnu), then his consort Lakshmi, then his cabinet ministers, etc, etc. My take: I have trouble believing this view.
7. Vishishtadvaita says Brahman has only good qualities. My take: This is a weakness in the Vishishtadvaita argument.
8. Vishishtadvaita does not support "I am Brahman". It says Jeevatma is an aspect of Paramatma. Advaita says "I am Brahman". My take: Is Chennai India? Is California USA? Seems like we can easily argue both ways. Further explanation: This is probably not a good way to look at it. The Vishishtadvaita view: Paramatma is to Jeevatma as Jeevatma is to the material body. Paramatma is the "Atmic" essence of the Jeevatma. This also seems reasonable.
9. One of Vishishtadvaita's arguments against Advaita is that since there is only Brahman, who is the teacher, who is the student – i.e. who is Krishna, and who is Arjuna? If they are both one, how can the teaching happen? This seems like a misguided argument to me. The concept of Mithya (lower-order Reality, or relative Reality) has to be clearly understood. Advaita is not saying the world is Unreal from the world's point of view. The world is real to every person in it. However, this is still relative Reality, just as it is for the dream-self in the dream. The waking state is completely outside the dream state. Similarly the Absolute Reality (Brahman) is outside our current Reality of the Universe.
10. A second argument that Vishishtadvaita makes is that Advaita's view reduces the Vedas to Mithya. Again, the same response as in the previous bullet. Mithya Vedas *can* point the seeker toward *satyam Brahman*.

Conclusion

If we show faith in the Vedas, then all three types of statements - bheda/abheda/ghataka must be correct. Then one possibility is that the three views are evolved from one another, or one view is a more subtle, sophisticated version of another. Logically it seems that we start with a ternary view: god, universe and myself. Then we migrate to a binary view of God and myself, and then to unary: god is myself. Dvaita -to- Vishishtadvaita -to- Advaita.

Advaita views Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita as valid views, with the caveat that they are intermediate and not the final destination. I have only witnessed respect from Swami Paramarthananda toward VA and Dvaita. On the other hand, I am quite shocked by the amount of hate spewed by the Dvaitin and Vishishtadvaitin toward Advaita views. I have personally visited a VA acharya with utmost reverence, to learn more about the VA philosophy and was summarily dismissed after I disclosed that I have been a student of Advaita for several years. I was told that I was worse than ignorant, since the ignorant can be taught. In my case I would have to un-learn the wrong teaching before I could begin.

Based on these factors, I am staunch Advaitin and ex-Vishishtadvaitin. Your mileage may vary.

Thanks for reading.



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12



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